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MODERN BUT HOW GOOD?

The Saudi Military: Camels to Missiles

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DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia—Looking dapper in a close-fitting green flight suit and red silk scarf, Prince Bandar bin Sultan escorted a group of Americans around Dhahran Air Force Base, the showpiece of the Saudi Arabian military, pointing with equal pride to sleek F-5 fighters and to modern single-family houses for the pilots and ground crews.

When a visitor addressed the 30-year-old nephew of King Khaled as "Your Highness," the prince frowned slightly.

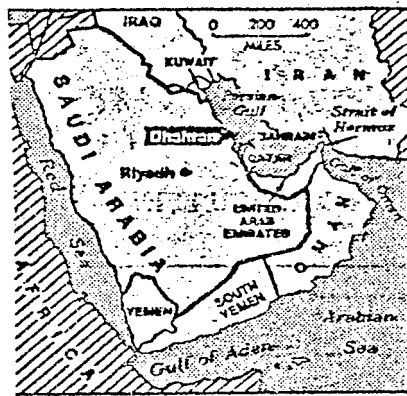
"I prefer to be called major," he said. "I worked hard to become a major. I was born a prince. I was 9 years old before I realized my name wasn't 'Prince.'"

Bandar's preference for military instead of royal titles is strikingly unusual in a country that is governed in feudal fashion by a sprawling royal family and where Western-style military rank, command structure and weapons were virtually unknown a generation ago.

A jet jockey who cultivates the fighter-pilot mystique, Bandar is as much at home behind the stick of a supersonic aircraft as his ancestors were in desert encampments. And he retains the traditional pride of the Bedouin warrior. "When I hear an officer from another country say, 'My unit is second to none,' I reply, 'Well, I command the none,'" Bandar says.

Yet American advisers say there are not many like Bandar among Saudi Arabia's 70,000 men at arms. That the Persian Gulf kingdom has vastly increased the sophistication of its weaponry is beyond question. How well its army can use its newly acquired weapons, or how it would perform in modern combat is another matter.

And the ability of the Saudi military is an issue of vital concern for the United States, not only because the country is a pivotal one in the Middle East but also because this country has grown steadily more dependent on the Saudi's vast reserves.



Times map by Don Clement

At the most basic level, U.S. analysts are concerned over whether the Saudi military would be able to protect the vital but fragile oil industry from outside aggression or sabotage. There is also the question of whether Saudi Arabia's neighbors have anything to fear from its \$13 billion-a-year military program.

Saudi and U.S. officials agree that the most serious potential military threats are posed by South Yemen, Ethiopia, two Soviet-supported Marxist states. Both South Yemen, situated just south of Saudi Arabia across a disputed border, and Ethiopia, across the Red Sea, have Cuban advisers with their military units. Saudi intelligence sources also express concern that Marxist revolutionaries ultimately may win a long-running but low intensity civil war in Oman, a sultanate just east of Saudi Arabia.

U.S. officials do not believe the Saudi royal family faces an internal revolution like the one that toppled Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in Iran. CIA Director Stansfield Turner said that although Saudi Arabia had some similarities with Iran, "it is much smaller, less Westernized, less developed and it is not a one-man rule but a family rule." The pluses and minuses lead me to believe that Saudi Arabia is not in as dangerous a situation as Iran was last year.

Before 1950, Saudi Arabia's armed forces were primarily equipped with vintage rifles, curved swords, spears, camels and swift Arabian horses. As recently as 30 years ago, according to U.S. advisers, the kingdom "did not have any of the trappings of a modern armed force. Military units organized into platoons, companies, battalions, regiments, brigades, divisions, and corps were nonexistent. They haven't faced combat," a Pentagon specialist said. It may be like the Indian army that did not know until 1962 (when India was

soldiers regularly took off for long periods without formal leave to tend to family obligations.

But in 1950, with King Ibn Saud nearing the end of his 20-year reign, Saudi Arabia sought U.S. aid in modernizing its armed forces. The process started slowly but today Saudi Arabia is the leading foreign customer for U.S. arms assistance, building its military organization around American-made planes, tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, rockets and machine guns.

In the last five years, Saudi Arabia has placed orders for \$17.5 billion in U.S. arms, training and military construction. During the same period, Iran ordered \$16.9 billion in American weapons—much of it canceled after the fall of the shah, and Israel ordered \$6.5 billion worth.

Beyond the issue of Saudi Arabia's internal security, the growing sophistication of its military equipment raises disturbing questions for U.S. foreign policy: What role does the kingdom really want to play in the Middle East and how well does that role fit in with U.S. interests?

U.S. specialists in Washington say they are under no illusions that Saudi Arabia will support U.S. policy in all cases. These specialists say that Saudi Arabia is determined to chart a foreign policy that places the unity of the Arab world first and anti-Communism second. However, Saudi interests and U.S. interests tend to overlap and reinforce each other on almost all issues except for those involving Israel.

There is no chance, U.S. officials say, that the Riyadh government might seek to fill the role of policeman of the Persian Gulf, which the shah had staked out for Iran. For one thing, the 70,000-member Saudi armed force lacks the numbers to replace what had been an Iranian force of 413,000.

Nevertheless, it is clearly in the national interest of both the United States and Saudi Arabia to keep Saudi oil flowing to world markets. U.S. officials are confident—but admit they cannot be certain—that Saudi Arabia would use its arms to prevent any sort of disruption of oil fields.

Just how good is the Saudi military?

U.S. advisers say that the Saudi armed forces cannot be compared with the battle-hardened military organizations of Israel, Egypt or Syria. And, the advisers admit, they do not know how well Saudi troops would perform in an emergency.

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